

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

For Release July 21, 1976

McGarvey 202/343-5634

MOURNING DOVES RISE, WOODCOCKS DECLINE

Mourning dove populations have risen slightly since last year in the western two-thirds of the United States according to joint spring field surveys, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced.

But a joint Canadian-U.S. breeding ground survey suggests that this spring, woodcock populations east of the Appalachian Mountains show a slight decline when compared to last year's surveys.

Mourning doves, one of the few native species which have increased since the arrival of the white man, are densest from North Dakota through north Texas. Southern Arizona, western California, central Colorado, and a portion of Georgia and the Carolinas also showed high numbers of this single most important game bird, in terms of harvest, in the United States. Low populations were noted along the Pacific mountain region and the Continental Divide, throughout much of the northern Appalachian and Great Lakes States, and in New England. The average autumn population nationwide is about 500 million birds, almost as numerous as blackbirds and starlings which peak at about the 600 million mark. Waterfowl--ducks and geese--usually number about 100 million birds during the fall migration.

Woodcock inhabit the eastern one-third of North America. Despite this year's slight decline in the East, the woodcock population index west of the Appalachian Mountains increased by about 6 percent.

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Wildlife biologists in Canada and the United States are unable to estimate the total woodcock population of North America because the breeding grounds extend far north into the roadless areas of Canada. Scientists estimate that these birds probably thrive right up to the tree lines that abut the tundra. But, there's absolutely no way to get into that breeding area for survey purposes. Scientists must, therefore, rely on surveys and the wing samples that hunters mail to the Service. From these two sources they can reasonably understand what is happening to the woodcock population, and, thus, regulate hunting. Overall, there probably are fewer woodcock today than, say, 50 years ago, but this is a function of the fact that man now inhabits much more of this bird's natural range than he did before. Scientists base their woodcock decisions on the trends noted in the annual data collection.

These survey results are presented to the Annual Regulations Conference for Shore and Migratory Upland Game Bird held in Washington on June 22. This group is composed of Federal and State wildlife officials, plus representatives of the conservation community. The survey results and the other evidence gathered for the conference are the major ingredients that go into the setting of annual hunting regulations for these species of birds. The final hunting regulations will be issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service later in the summer.

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